

2003 Independence Message

By Dr. The Honourable Ralph E. Gonsalves

Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines

On the Occasion of the Nation's Twenty-Fourth Anniversary of Independence

27 October 2003

His Excellency the Governor-General and Lady Ballantyne;
His Lordship the Judge representing The Honourable Chief Justice;
The Honourable Leader of the Opposition and Mrs. Eustace;
The Honourable Members of Cabinet and Parliament and their spouses;
Their Lordships and other members of the Clergy;
The Commissioner of Police and Mrs. Harry;
Your Excellencies of the Diplomatic Corps;
Members of disciplined Forces and others on Parade;
Other distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;
Fellow Vincentians;
Children of our Caribbean Civilisation.

Today our nation, at home and abroad, celebrates its twenty-fourth anniversary. On October 27, 1979, our nation, already in formation, acquired the formal constitutional and political status of an independent nation-state. Our forebears, as exemplified by our distinguished leaders such as The Right Excellent Joseph Chatoyer, National Hero, George Augustus Mc Intosh, Ebenezer Theodore Joshua, and Robert Milton Cato, and by Vincentians of all walks of life, here and in

the diaspora, through their hard work and many-sided struggles, bequeathed to us, at our nation's formal political birth, a land of hope, faith, love and unity.

This magnificent landscape and seascape, which we Vincentians own, called St. Vincent and the Grenadines has been peopled by the indigenous population, the Callinagoes (also known as the Caribs), and migrants, some coerced, others voluntary, from diverse countries and cultures including Africa, Europe (North and South), India, China, and the Middle-East. Prior to the commencement of European conquest and settlement in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the aboriginal peoples, sought as we still do today, to come to terms with nature, and manage their external environment, albeit in different conditions and at a much lower level of technological, scientific and material development. Since then, this nation of unity has been forged through European colonialism and mercantilist expansion, capitalism and modern imperialism, slavery and indentureship, constitutional decolonisation, mature regionalism and formal independence.

Through all these years the productive apparatus of our country has evolved with an admixture of goods and services for example, tobacco and sugar; cotton and arrowroot; bananas and root crops; tourism, international finance, and other assorted services. Technologically, we have moved from the donkey-cart to the mini-bus; from the canoe and sail boat to the motor vessel and the aeroplane; from the oral word to the world of print; from slate and black lead to the computer and the internet; from the so-called "nigger-gram" to the telegram and telephone; from the fixed line phone to the mobile cellular; and from cattle power to horse and engine power.

Through the fever of history, the impetus of technological changes, the constitutional and political evolutions, the migrant demographics and population admixtures, we have fashioned a free and democratic society committed to a core of tried and tested values from our Caribbean civilization and its Vincentian component. Our nation has moved from a society in which each of the racial or cultural sections had its own relatively distinct pattern of socio-cultural integration through to a solidified heterogeneous whole arriving, more or less, at a homogenous entity, practically-speaking. This has been a remarkable journey embracing the Kingdom values of hope, faith, love and unity. We can certainly teach our friends in Europe, North America and

elsewhere much about all this as they still grope with the challenges and demands arising from their emergent multi- culturalism.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines is 165 years from the abolition of slavery; is more than 100 years from the end of indentureship; and is sixty-years from the 1935 Uprising which ushered in the start of the social-democratic revolution which has gone through the staging posts of universal adult suffrage of 1951, internal self-government in 1969 and formal independence in 1979, and which social democratic revolution is still being shaped and advanced under the Unity Labour Party government in the age of modern globalisation.

Over the past 168 years since the abolition of slavery our people have made outstanding progress. This splendid performance has been largely due to the efforts and sacrifices of our people, at home and abroad. To be sure, our friends and allies from overseas especially from North and South America, Europe, Africa and Asia have assisted us but it is the sweat of our people's own labours which has been principally responsible for our successes, thus far.

There is a most important lesson for us here. St. Vincent and the Grenadines cannot, and must not, adopt a mendicant's posture. Indeed, some from afar who generously assist, and to whom we are grateful, occasionally cross the line in their relations with us. Sometimes, attempts are made to threaten us or bully us; now and again acts proximate to disrespect are committed against us; and the fig leaf of an odd slur against our good name is raised before us.

Our Caribbean civilisation, including its Vincentian component, has legitimacy; our people possess nobility; and our people and our leaders are mature and wise. This legitimacy, nobility, wisdom and maturity must continue to be utilised in the interest of our people's humanisation.

So, we as a nation must rely first and foremost on ourselves to survive, thrive and prosper. We know as an act of faith and belief that the Lord helps those who help themselves. Self-reliance for us is vital; not a primitive autarky but an interconnectedness with the rest of the world which has as its foundation stone our energy, creativity, discipline, will and a sense of self-mastery. That is my simple message to you, my fellow Vincentians.

In my independence Day address to you in 2001 and 2002 I commented that there is a stubborn minority in our midst who have an affection for laziness, criminality and vagabondry. I urged all

in 2001 and 2002 to help this stubborn minority of our people to assume, in practical terms, their obligations to themselves as individuals, to their families and those who depend on them, and to the nation. I am pleased to report that I sense that many from this hitherto recalcitrant minority are heeding the call for responsible conduct. I am overjoyed to see less laziness, more workmanlike attitudes, less criminal behaviour, and a greater quest for education and training by people of all rank and status.

This does not mean that there are not some who are still lagging too far behind these progressive shifts. I implore them to come aboard the national vehicle of enhanced responsibilities, TOGETHER NOW.

I am sure that the openness and transparency of the Government, the commitment and hard work of its leaders, the public education efforts especially through official bodies like the Constitutional Reform Commission, the implementation of sound public policies, the wonderful work of non-governmental organisations including the churches, and the efforts of the responsible sections of the media, and the guidance by senior family members, have all contributed to a better society and less individual failures.

Nevertheless, we must be reminded that there is in our midst a group of desperate men and women who have agendas contrary to the common good. I do not have to provide the details, most Vincentians know who they are and from which stable they come. The poisonous malignancies which they spew daily are an affront to the sensibilities and good-naturedness of our people. As one former Attorney-General succinctly and correctly puts it in relation to them. "The tail is wagging the dog".

So, we must keep our focus. The ULP government has laid out its vision for our nation with crystal clarity. We as a nation have achieved much over the past 2½ years of the ULP's governance. We must continue to build on them. Challenges abound and I have absolute confidence that together we can meet them successfully. But all of us must work together.

I want to tell a story which moved me very much recently. It concerns the deepening of love-for-country. A sophisticated, well-educated daughter of the soil, who has been residing overseas for several years, came to see me at the Prime Minister's Office. She told me that a few weeks ago

her eighty-seven year old father, who is stricken with severe arthritis in his legs, was sitting in a chair at home watching me on television staging erect at a function while the National Anthem was being played. Immediately, her father struggled to stand up, and with physical support, remained upstanding and sang the National Anthem. Tears came to the lady's eyes. When her father was quizzed by her as to why the effort, he answered simply: "I love my country and I respect "my boy". By "my boy" he meant his Prime Minister. Remarkable: Love for country, respect for its leadership! Clearly there is abundant good in our people across this blessed land!

Today, I have deliberately not quoted statistics on this or that matter. Within a month or so the Estimates and the Budget will be presented and you will get a surfeit of numbers which show the phenomenal advances over the past 2½ years. On this occasion of our twenty-fourth anniversary of independence, I give to you an uplifting message and a map of the arduous road we have travelled thus far. I say to you that I love you and am truly honoured to be your Prime Minister.

As the political head of the State administration, I want to speak directly to our public servants, teachers, nurses, policemen/policewomen and all the other State employees in the central government, the statutory corporations and State-owned companies.

Over the past 2½ years, so far, of the life of the government which I have the honour to lead, I am satisfied that, by and large, the public servant and all other State employees have responded well to the demands, entreaties, urgings, directions and guidance, of and by, the political directorate whom a free people duly elected to govern them. I commend, and thank the public employees, most sincerely for their enhanced productivity, their increased sensitivity towards the people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines whom they serve, and their laudable devotion to duty. Without your sterling efforts this government would not have accomplished as much as it has done over the short 2½ years so far. I love you dearly and will continue to look out for the advancement of your welfare and that of your families who depend upon you.

Accordingly, to the extent that an improvement in public servants' material benefits can be a sign of our nation's appreciation, I promise today that they will be granted a salary increase from January 1, 2004 and also for 2005. I have recently received proposals for salary increases from the representatives of public servants, teachers, policemen/women, nurses and doctors. The officials in my Ministry and I are currently studying them. We will shortly engage the relevant

trade union leaders in discussions/negotiations on this matter. Appropriate financial provisions will be made in the Estimates for 2004 and 2005. I want to thank these trade union leaders for their thoughtful submissions.

I am sure that the minority of those public servants who are not performing as well as they should, would acknowledge this fact and buck up. Ours is a very small country with little or no room for error or slackness in work; we are too closely-knitted, and dependent on each other, to tolerate less than maximum productive effort. What we produce is for our own advancement individually and as a nation. I feel certain that we will see even more improvements in attitudes to work and production over the next year. That would be a bountiful gift to our nation.

My heart, my soul, my spirit, my very being are filled with jubilation on this our twenty-fourth anniversary of independence, of our freedom and national responsibility. Poetically, I repeat these uplifting lines of inspiration:

"Give us Thy wisdom
More than ever before
Now that our country
Has passed through the door
To wider freedom.

"Hold a people's hand
And give us Thy heart
So that everyman
Lives in the Land
And holds dear the part
He must play
To fulfill this day.

"Give us Thy glory

In the days ahead;

O let our country

Be proud of its story

When we are dead."

May Almighty God continue to bless us all!

Thank you!